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A New Era in Religious Education

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"A New Era in Religious Education" is almost exactly the title of a book* written twenty-five years ago by a man beloved of us all: the prophet of our religious education program, and a man who has patiently waited for us to catch up with him all these years: Dean Angus H. MacLean.

If then there is anything "new" about the "New Era" I speak of, it is new chiefly in that life, educationally speaking, has caught up with Dr. MacLean's basic insights.

I shall resist the temptation to enlarge upon the world's changing state during the past quarter century. Suffice it to say that it is a world whose tragedies and stresses have led many despairing people to lose hope and faith in the human enterprise. But it is also a world in which more and more thoughtful people are turning to liberal religion and, what concerns us especially, bringing us their children.

I shall confine myself to three aspects of this new era:

First, the new importance of the family in a growing, mobile population.

Second, the new emphasis upon the layman in religion.

Third, the resultant change in the image of our ministry.

We are becoming more and more aware of the population problem. "Togetherness" bids fair to become a curse, not a blessing. One facet of the problem was pointed out by Margaret Mead on a recent visit to California's exploding surburbia. She observed that many people today, fearful and unable to face reality, and lacking anything better to do, retire to the suburbs and have children.

How far people's philosophic unsettlement leads them to have large families in a quest for meaning is, of course, an intangible. But it is plain fact that these larger families compound their problems by being *physically* unsettled. They do not "settle down" to have children: one family in four moves its residence

*The New Era in Religious Education, A. H. MacLean, Beacon Press, Boston, 1934

FOR THE MINISTRY

every year. The percentage of mobility is highest among the urban population, especially among those having young children.

Someone has said we are returning to the early Bible Age, and becoming nomads again. But the nomads moved as a people. Their deep sense of community produced the social ethic of our religious heritage. Today's families are more like tumbleweeds than nomads. They are rootless bundles blown across life's empty plain.

This family mobility is of course the despair of civic leaders or Religious Education Directors trying to staff church schools. But let me suggest we face up to the situation, and by so doing, actually take advantage of it. The essence of it is this: more than ever the family is the continuous — often the *only* continuous — primary associational unit in people's lives today. Any effective ministry in this new era will have to be one in which the home is central.

If there is anything "new" in this, it is that what we have been saying for many years about the centrality of the family, and about parents as teachers of religion, is now of crucial importance. As I shall point out in a moment, I think we have *talked* a lot about this but not delivered the goods.

Today's world forces people to think. Thinking people are, in greater numbers than ever, greater numbers than we can easily handle, coming to us; seekers themselves whose seeking is made urgent because of their children. Because of the mobile nature of today's families, seeking and finding for both parents and children is something primarily for the home. Parent is once again priest.

This is part of today's new stress on the layman in religion. We rightly make much of our fellowship movement, but in every church there is a lay movement. Church leaders find they cannot meet people's needs under the old Protestant formula of the church as that place "where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered" — i.e. the Sunday service and sermon as the primary instrument. I would add also,

thousand ministers showed that only one in twenty-five thought of his work in terms of teaching.

Thoughtful critics of the church school have said what we all know to be true, that much of its activity is superficial. Edith Hunter not long ago suggested we ought to disband the Sunday School, and turn the whole business over to the home. The burden of her argument was, that the plan of the liberal churches, to create in church school classes a two-to-three-hour weekly "laboratory of living," is just not being followed. On the contrary, what *is* happening in many places is a repetition under liberal slogans, of the same lick-and-a-promise Sunday School which thoughtful professionals, even in orthodox Protestantism, today have flatly told their churches is worse than a waste of time and energy.

Now I don't agree with Mrs. Hunter that we either can, or ought, to turn religious education over to the home. She passes over too easily much fine work that our church schools now do. She is over-optimistic about the present ability of parents to do the job, and she overlooks the fundamentally social nature of religion. But she is a helpful critic if she forces us to face up to the demands of a New Era for a family-centered ministry; one not misled by the cliches of preaching for adults and classes for children.

Mrs. Fahs has shrewdly observed, that people go right on in the old habits long after they have formally subscribed to new ideas which ask for a change of habit. This is acutely true of our religious education program today. We have not only our own uncertainties to contend with, but we are swamped by the difficulties brought by the new people rushing into our churches. These people illustrate Mrs. Fahs' contention: they are in the first rebellious stage of regurgitating orthodoxy, and in the same moment are compulsively, blindly, acting under its habit-patterns. Under pressure from their own anxieties and the glances of their neighbors, they rush us, along with themselves, into setting up classes for their children. Such hastily-assembled gatherings (often taught by people who are far from having

re-thought religion) take all our energy and people. Almost no time is left for competence. And even less is left for what is my main topic: whether classes, even the best, are really meeting the need, or answering the deepest demands, of liberal religion understood in terms of personal growth.

I'm not talking, you see, about our need for more physical facilities in this new era. I dare say that, even if we got all the buildings and classrooms we dream of, we might find ourselves stuck with a church school misconceived in terms of the public school, whose facilities and teaching standards hopelessly outdistance us already, with no prospect we'll ever catch up. But a church school is NOT a public school, and this not just because its subject-matter differs — or for that matter even if it were much the same. It LOOKS like a public school because it has forgotten its own nature: the church is an institution whose faith and practice ought to be that kind of total personal ministry, which, to be sure, the best public school teachers aspire to, but which they cannot possibly fulfill in a situation where, by law, faith can never become explicit; where by circumstances, the pupil is isolated from his family context; and where the sensitive teacher can see the parents' problems in the child — but is helpless to bring any ministry to the home.

Let's be clear then that we are not trying to teach religion in some formal sense, nor to preach people into goodness, nor even to pass on the facts — necessary as these are — of theology and church history. We are trying to companion souls, to minister to people. Parents and friends and roommates do this every day.

Religion takes acquaintance — intimate acquaintance: it is not a mass proposition, a Sunday-come-to-meeting proposition alone. It is a ministry we all share. A hundred years ago Emerson could say, in a town where everybody knew everybody else, that a minister ought "not too often to visit the families of the parish."

But today — while I do not underrate preaching nor what can be done by a good church school class — there is nothing our tumbleweed population needs more than personal acquaintance, and significant personal involvement, in religious fellowship.

What *is* the liberal church's special gift and task today?

I'd like to re-think the whole thing. I'd begin by putting the responsibility squarely upon the parents: not *abandoning* it to them, but by confronting them at the very beginning with the truth that religion is not something the church can do for them. I'd not worry about classes for the children initially, but about helping parents re-think their own faith first. And then I'd ask, what kind of program this faith indicates by its nature: what in that program is best done at home, and what in the church; what kind of professional help and facilities it calls for.

What are we doing *now?* We are saddling our DRE's and our volunteer committee people with the burden of enlisting teachers and the mechanics of administration, which we ought not to ask of them. Because we do ask it and they acquiesce, they have nothing left for their real work, which is with *people,* little and big. In the desperate attempt to have classes for everybody, we burden the gifted workers we have, and we force others into assuming a poorly-understood teaching role which is strange, new and awkward; by no means a channel through which they can share the many wonderful things we know they have.

What would happen if instead of worrying so much about classes and attendance therein, we put religion on a wholly voluntary basis, consistent with the truth that the Spirit cannot be compelled anyway? What if we let each leader contribute his best, in his own way, not worrying whether it is in a "class"? What if we had fewer groups, but more vital ones — vital because voluntary? Would it not be wiser to meet Tuesday afternoons as well as Sunday mornings? Would we need as many classrooms — or the same kind of classrooms — if we did?

What can the church do, which the family cannot do for itself? It can supply resources and professional leadership. But it can supply something else, which now is marginal to or competitive with classwork: I mean the festivals. Too often the Church Christmas Party is a poor thing, properly the target of our humor, redeemed only by that of which ineptitude can never

rob it: the poignancy of childhood and the miracle of Christmas itself. I am not suggesting we imperil its spontaneity or lose its essential homespun charm, but I do think that if we made it central, not marginal, and brought to it all the talent and ingenuity we know we have in even the smallest church or fellowship, it would repay us in coin of a genuinely spiritual realm. (And speaking as a minister, it would relieve me of my dreary annual assignment of "saying something Christmassy" in a sermon. Christmas is its own sermon.) Speaking generally, I think the church can pool the resources of all of us, in festivals which, by nature, speak a various language. Preparation for these makes for fellowship; thinking for and about them carries instruction; participation or attendance upon them is worship at its best.

I'm sure I could say lots more. But I shall have succeeded, if I jar us all into a fresh look at what the times demand of us, and suggest that, amazingly enough, we have more than enough to meet the demand if we will make right use of what we have.

My No. 3 child's Brownie troop is a small example of what I mean. It was on the point of disbanding because the willing nanny who'd done the whole job was no longer willing to be the nanny-goat. So the mothers got together for the first *real* meeting they'd ever had (up to then it had been mostly a game of drop-the-handkerchief by telephone.) They persuaded the retiring leader to be consultant; they whacked up the jobs among themselves, and they're having the best year ever.

I think we can do the same thing with religious education. What people need is not an expert to take over for them but an expert to help them help themselves. This brings me to the matter of how we obtain know-how. Cautioning you that this know-how may be thought of differently if we adopt my suggestion of a fresh approach, I owe it to you to say something on the subject. I begin by saying, "We don't make full use of what we have." There is no group, however small, that today can not have access to at least some measure of the know-how it needs for an educational ministry. I say that even though the demands

made of our headquarters staff are quite impossible to fulfill. A few dollars, a little encouragement, and lots of imagination can put interested leaders next to books, to resources in their own communities, to summer institutes, and to the summer schools our seminaries offer.

The greatest single source of leadership today, and one still largely untapped, is the layman — especially the woman whose family has reached the point where, with a little help from us, she can resume her leadership in church and community, bringing to it all that family life has taught her. We have some of these wonderful people at my school now. They are moving at their own pace, and setting their own limits, in terms of aims and standards they know well. Most of these persons have no false professional ambitions, but there is no limit to what they may achieve if we help them on their way.

Of course what I'm talking about calls not only for a refocusing of the image of the minister and of the popular misconception of what a Director of Religious Education really does. It calls for a better-trained ministry. A genuine, 24-carat minister of education (we have few if any such now) would have to have not only as much education as we give for a standard B.D. degree — and that's pitifully little — but *more* education. One top Protestant educator* says we need nothing less than a "new teaching order" for a New Era in Religious Education. And anyone who thinks you can produce such people in a hurry or hire them for peanuts is "two-thirds of a ghost." Even if he's laboring under the false image of the public school, he ought to remember that every public school teacher gets training, academic and clinical, which our B.D. and M.R.E. programs simply don't provide.

You may have expected me to say something about money. I have tried, rather, to provoke that kind of soul-searching, that inventory of what we have already, that ought to precede any raising or spending of funds. But as our denominations move

*Wesner Fallaw, *Andover-Newton Bulletin*, April, 1959

toward consolidation, they need to be cautioned against the error so many courting couples make: the delusion that two can live more cheaply than one. We now provide our CLC staff, which is our first venture in consolidation, with less funds today than we gave them as separate churches a decade ago. We provide no funds for research. We drive our staff around the country at a pace that St. Paul himself couldn't maintain, an itinerary that would have killed even good John Wesley. Some wonder whether our new denomination's statement of purpose is Christian enough. Well, there is no doubt that we exact of our CLC people, paid and volunteer, a self-abnegating devotion that will qualify them for starry crowns in any heaven old or new.

Yes, we'll have to have more money and more leadership if we are to reap the fields now white to the harvest. It reminds me of the farmer down Maine who stopped by his neighbor's place and asked, "Well, Si, how's 'taters this year?" Si thought a minute, shifted the straw to the other side of his mouth and replied, "Pretty good, Zeke, seein' as how I didn't plant any."

In this New Era, let's do some planting.

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